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ABSTRACT

The increasing institutionalization of teaching has been a central aspect of educational developments in education in Norway because important teaching functions, previously preserved informally in the home and in the local community, have been gradually replaced by formal education. The school-community network has been weakened because few people know each other. The School and Its Local Environment is a project designed to adjust conditions in the school to facilitate full integration into the local environment and to facilitate greater participation by young people in cultural action, social services and organizations, and the working life of the community. Its management plan calls for the establishment of closely coordinated school and community committees working together to integrate the functions and activities of the school and community. Among the possible sources of resistance to the project are: (1) lack of local initiative; (2) interdisciplinary and interdepartmental disagreement; (3) negative views toward outside experts; (4) administrative and staff resistance; and (5) lack of communication. Also, the project must find a balance between local wishes and objectives and goals set by national education policies. The project is still in its initial phase, since further research is pending. (JD)

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THE SCHOOL IN ITS LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

By Project Leader Finn Daniel Raaen

The National Council for Innovation in Education

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SP 018956

The Project: The School in Its Local Environment (in this case, restricted in scope to compulsory primary and secondary levels, grades 1-9). Central responsibility for the project: The National Council for Innovation in Education.

Introduction:

The Project described -- "The School in Its Local Environment" -- is still at its initial phase. Viewed in relation to the goals set for the project, a force field analysis (positive and nedgative forces) would at this stage, necessarily be hypothetical in nature.

"The School in Its Local Environment" project, in many ways, is a continuation of a recently completed project titled, "Alternative Teaching/Expanded Teaching" (1974-79). Experiences gained in this latter project have been incorporated as essential presuppositions for the former project. Thus, the following description will attempt to provide an ellaboration of that interrelationship.

I. Background

"The School in Its Local Environment" Viewed from a Perspective of Educational Policies

The increasing institutionalization of teaching has been a central aspect of developments in education in Norway, as well as in most industrialized countries. Several important teaching functions, previously preserved informally in the home and in the local community, have been gradually replaced by formal education. This change, first and foremost, has been caused by the expansion of the educational system, but also as a result of the expansion of kindergartens, pre-schools and day care centers, among others. Together these have meant that an increasingly larger number of children are spending more time than previously in institutions whose primary goals are education and training.

At the same time, the environment of the local society manifests clear tendencies toward reduced opportunities for training and apprenticeship. This is also the case

in new housing developments which are situated far from places of work. In such local societies the social network has been weakened because few people know one another. Social contact is often restricted to the nuclear family. This is also true for rural areas where moving and commuting have contributed to the progress of the same tendencies we find in newly developmed communities. Increased moving results in uprooting families from a familiar and manageable milieu to new and unfamiliar surroundings. More frequently than before, marriages break up, social ties are severed and new ones must be established.

Due to the conditions described above, it may become difficult to preserve stabilizing values such as a sense of belonging, togetherness and broad social contact.

What Can the School in Cooperation with the Local Community do to help Correct the Problems Described

The central question is whether the school system, in cooperation with others in the local community, is able to do something about solving the problems which have gradually arisen, and which will probably continue to arise as a consequence of a general change in social structure---and do so from a local vantage point. Clearly, if this is to be possible, our school will have to break with tradition. For a long time, the school has limited the concept of general education basically to mean learning and knowledge and mainly tied to the school's course of instruction. By contrast, an expanded concept of teaching can be realized by mooring it in known local conditions and by activating children and youth to participate in concerted cultural action, in social services, in organizations, various activities and in working life. This in itself is an importans goal of educational policy.

The challenge one faces here touches upon policies which are social, pedagogical and regional in nature. Local ideal goals and objectives must be viewed in relation to national goals of educational policy. The school must gradually become anchored in a local environment while, at the same time, it must not lose sight of national and global perspectives. If the school is indeed to realize such objectives, then the approach to problem-solving must be: "How can conditions in the school be best adjusted to facilitate its integration into the local environment?" Or, on the other hand: "How can conditions in the local environment be developed to facilitate the integration of the school into the local environment?" In other words, it would be of great interest to examine the school's structure and manner of operation, including subject content, work methods and social environment. Similarly, it is interesting to look at what can be labeled as the external conditions of the school's activities. In case of the latter, reference is to the following conditions: inter-departmental and

inter, disciplinary cooperation; work placement (in business/or social work); a more extensive collaboration with parents/guardians and other resource persons in the local environment, especially when directly tied to school instruction; and the utilization of the school as a recreation center.

In sum, "The School in Its Local Environment" project is bound within a framework of local initiative and a decentralized form of decision-making, and attempts to accomplish the following.

- realize an expanded concept of teaching
- replace broken social ties/create new social bonds (social networking)
- create increased security and social welfare within the context of the school
- create improved social identity
- and, from this point of departure, prevent social problems.

The Management and Organization of the Project and the Pedagogical Objectives

In the following we will take a closer look at a concrete approach to problem-solving raised by the project. As stated earlier, an important objective of project activities is local participation and commitment to school-related matters and local environment. If this is to be realized, we believe that those involved directly, must first and foremost be the ones to define which fundamental questions should be examined. They must also set priorities for the various approaches to problem-solving and determine the manner by which approaches will be implemented. In other words, the central concepts in this context will be the imparting of a solid orientation regarding problems and management by participants.

The following managerial structure has been designed by The National Council for Innovation in Education for the school board in order to ensure that these good intentions are also applied.

A school or school board which wishes to participate in the project must ascertain which departments, organizations or other cooperating agencies will be participating in the project. Once the participants are identified, an ad hoc committee can be appointed to discuss the various aspects of the project and the special tasks which will need to be accomplished.

It is advisable for the communical executive committee to establish a local executive committee at an early point in the planning of the project, especially where several departments wish to participate in the project, and in cases where local projects

plans fall within the jurisdiction of several departments. It is important for the local executive committee to assume a central role in the shaping of the local project design; indeed when the project is in the local implementation phase, the local executive committee must be responsible for the impetus given the project locally.

The local project leader is responsible for the daily running of the project on a local level. Where it is applicable to establish a local executive committee, he/she will, in addition, act as the executive officer for the committee.

Moreover, the local project leader will be responsible for organization/coordination work between differing liaison authorities/schools in the municipality. He/she will also maintain contact with The National Council for Innovation in Education.

At individual schools it may also be necessary to have a liaison person/executive committee to coordinate research at the individual school.

An important task assigned the central project leader/executive committee is to draw important guidelines, with the assistance of reference groups, to sustain the progress of the project. The central project leader/executive committee is also intended to function as an idea bank for the regional and municipal executive committee. These responsibilities are natural to the central agency, escpecially when considering the wealth of the experience and contacts which the National Council has amassed in the implementation of projects locally.

At first sight, this may seem to be a cumbersome and rather bureaucratic managerial structure. We, however, are conviced that in most cases the successful implementation of a project requires such a structure. This is so because clearly, in many cases, the approaches to problem-solving in the project will touch upon diverse interest groups, departments, and organizations which will feel their special and traditional interests impinged upon; perhaps these many agencies will be in conflict with one another.

The National Council's understanding of the importance of local management of the project is further underlined by the fact that from the outset, the Council demands no more than that the locally chosen approaches to problem-solving be limited to a broadly-framed idea outline formulated by the National Council. Support from the National Council is contingent upon an evaluation of whether objectives will in fact be reached given the financial means allocated the project. At this point, the National Council would be able to supply guidance, should there be a request for such assistance.

Evaluation of the Project

Since "The School in Its Local Environment" project is still at an initial phase, only general guidelines for its evaluation can be stated. However, a good indication of what approach will probably be chosen can be found in examining experiences made in the "Alternative Teaching/Expaned Teaching" project mentioned above. It generated several similar problem-solving approaches and put a similar stress on the kind of managerial structure found in "The School in Its Local Environment" project.

Generally, a leading principle will be the continous process of summing up of evaluation results, indicating the direction of the project work. On the local level, plans should be made for a coordination of work with other test schools which have a format similar to one's own.

The National Council will be able to assist where there is a need for regional, and to a certain extent national, collection of data to facilitate the summing up of developments in the project work.

II. Change Analysis

Conditions which Hinder the Implementation of a Project and Strategies for Neutralizing These

The following will be an examination of conditions which may be described as obstacles for the positive development and implementation of the project. We will also point to different strategies which should be regarded as fundamental for coping with these obstacles.

Consumer-Oriented Society Has a Passive Effect on Initiative

There are some social developments which clearly hinder the objectives of "The School in Its Local Environment" project. Market economy with its production of goods and services for purchase and sale permeate the social structure at all levels. A consequence of this, among many, is a widely maintained perception that one can "buy" solutions for nearly all problems -- that includes a broad spectrum ranging from physical/somatic complaints to problems of a social/psychological nature.

It is something of this attitude that one encounters in "The School in Its Local Environment" project which attempts to involve people in matters which concern

them directly. There is no simple solution to this problem. From a long-range perspective, one could expect that those who become positively involved in "The Shool in Its Local Evironment" project will experience that such forms of cooperation are rewarding and meaningful, and, in turn, that this will promote a more extensive kind of involvement and commitment.

The School's Traditional Concept of General Education and the Idea Behind the Comprehensive School

"The School in Its Local Environment" project lends itself to debate with regard to its merits and ideology. As earlier noted, the project gives much importance to the presupposition that teaching, to a greater degree than previously, is to be anchored in known local community factors and is to break with a tradition which restricts the concept of general education to encompass mainly the teachings and knowledge tied exclusively to instruction at school. Many may feel that these intentions conflict with the idea of the so-called comprehensive school. In brief, and consequently somewhat over-simplified, this concept implies uniformity in schools in the country as a whole, in order to avoid favoring certain groups of pupils over others. There is a point here. The school can become so attuned to the local community that it will succeed in disqualifying its pupils for education/work outside of it. On the other hand, and more interesting in today's context, is the fact that the school, to a great extent, has become the common denominator, with the effect of disqualifying its graduate from work in the local society. The question, in other words, is whether "The School in Its Local Environment" project can find a balance between local wishes and objectives and the goals set by national education policies. Herein lies the challenge to the project. Indeed, the project's legitimacy will be established or discredited by, among others, its ability to define solutions to these questions, which have to be relevant in both professional and professional policy terms. The great diversity and inequality we find in local societies guarantees that the answers cannot be simple, but must consider all the special conditions present in each individual school district.

Inter-Departmental and Inter-Disciplinary Cooperation Versus Tendencies of Departmentalization

In addition to what we already noted, "The School in Its Local Environment" project will in many cases demand expanded inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary cooperation. Such cooperation may for instance enable the school to enter into untraditional and innovative cooperation in the day-care sector, the social sector, the cultural sector, with voluntary organizations and in economic life. Inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary cooperation will facilitate a thinking and perspective surrounding current problem areas that are more comprehensive and

less exclusive. On the surface, there appears to be broad concensus about these views. In practice, however, problems can frequently arise because various organizations and departments feel that the project (or projects) impinges upon interest areas which these authorities consider to fall under their jurisdiction. In such cases we have little belief in a central imposition of inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary cooperation. A better strategy would be in the first instance to get together with the parties involved, and thereby reach agreement regarding areas of cooperation in which all parties will agree that further development will result in mutual benefit and profit. In the best circumstances, there would already be co-operation in these areas. There would then be possibilities for proposing more effective collaboration, as well as greater rationalization and systematization in the already extant cooperation. Such positive experiences may be an incentive for more expanded future cooperation.

Experience from the project "Alternative Teaching/Expanded Teaching" has shown that the above is indeed a workable strategy.

The Expert Force has a Passive Effect

Experts are to be found in and outside public administration: in departments, on diverse councils/committees in state administration, on a county and municipal level, and for that matter, on a local level at the individual school, represented by the principal and the teaching staff.

A constantly growing expert force in many ways poses comlications for "The School in Its Local Environment" project. Belief in experts, in many contexts, is diametrically opposed to the belief in one's own ability to think and take the initiative. The experts often have an uncompromising belief in what they represent and as a corollary will have a disarming effect on people's initiative and desire to take action.

Given these conditions, how are contra-strategies to be introduced? This is a difficult question to answer. At a more far-range perspective one ought to look for attitude changes in these matters, and at every level. Concretely, one ought to bring about an attitude change toward experts through de-mystification of the power of experts in a great number of contexts, and indeed make clear that experts are not all-knowing.

From a more short-range perspective, the de-mystification of the expert role could be achieved by increased cooperation across sector borders and in a context of different interest groups (e.g., parents, teachers, pupils, other professional/interest groups).

The views regarding the power of experts and strategies for neutralizing its effect, were developed in part as a result of experiences which have already been made in "The School in Its Local Environment" project, and partly from the summing up of experiences made in the "Alternative Teaching/Expanded Teaching" project described earlier.

The "Alternative Teaching/Expaned Teaching" project yielded other concrete experiences which have been useful in the planning and implementation of action connected to the project "The School in Its Local Environment". We would like to examine these in greater detail.

Problems of Unstable Teaching Staff

An important presupposition for making informal structural changes (in part also formal ones) become lasting changes, is that there should be a minimum of turnover among the members of the organization. A great deal of movement in personnel will complicate the process of handing down the new tradition. In a number of schools, especially in North Norway, we were able to see in the "Alternative Teaching/ Expanded Teaching" project that nearly an entire teaching staff resigned from one school year to another. This nearly made impossible progress in project work at some schools.

Teacher resignation presents a somewhat uncertain factor which need to be taken into consideration when starting project work. Where it is likely that the phenomenon will indeed be a factor, then it must of course, be planned for and, as related to research strategy, it will mean that a mimimum of teacher-dependent procedures can be introduced.

Lack of Jobs - The Consequences for Project Implementation

Work for pupils in economic life/social work is considered an important agent of establishing improved contact between the local environment and the school. It is also a way of realizing the concept of expanded teaching. The problems however is that there is an increasing lack of jobs in the economy and increasing unemployment rate in a number of local communities. To base oneself too greatly on practice for pupils in actual work situation in business/social work may well conflict with the local work force. This was the experience, for instance, in the project "Alternative Teaching/Expanded Teaching". When such conflict becomes evident, we see it as natural to yield pupils' interests to those of the work force.

An alternative solution/strategy in this context would be to allow the pupils to observe, register and chart different aspects of the economy in their local environment through project work. Then apply this material to instruction. In this way, teaching will become more interesting and relevant, at the same time as one will avoid occupying jobs in business.

Resistance Mechanisms in Organizations: Absorption and Puncturing

The following are additional examples of obstacles which can hinder successful project implementation. These are built-in resistance mechanisms which hinder changes and which mainfest themselves extensively in a number of formal organizations. The phenomena we refer to may be described as "absorption" and "puncturing". The first expression implies that new ideas are changed in order to fit in the established structure. In this way they lose their initial content and only the name remains. "Puncturing" refers to the attitude held by those responsible, implying, "Of course, this is an excellent plan", while at the same time weakening its intent by figuratively letting out the air and shelving it out of reach.

The concepts of absorption and puncturing are helpful when analyzing whether actions consist of mere ideological phraseology or whether they are given genuine content.

Absorption is typically to be found when the teaching staff at a school expresses a positive interest in joining an expanded cooperation which is in the spirit of the stated intentions of "The School in Its Local Environment" project, while at the same time saying that when it comes to conditions present at their school, it is they who are to be considered as experts and must have the final say in the matter. As we can see, most things remain unchanged. The new views are only absorbed in the already existing school structure.

A useful strategy for encountering such problems is to problematize the nature of cooperation together with the teachers. A strengthening of the social and professional climate among the staff members through an organizational development program could be a complementary strategy. The hypothesis here is that subborn attachment to tradition and inflexibility can also be based in a lack of team spirit within the teaching personnel with resulting insecurity on the part of the individual teacher. A social climate of defensiveness can be a consequence.

Puncturing can be illustrated when the school administration in a municipality openly expresses positive attitude toward "The School in Its Local Environment" project,

and a desire to support it through action in their municipality, while at the same time consistently "forgetting" to give information regarding important agreements and meetings, and generally giving low priority to project work in favor of more routinized and less meaningful administrative work at the school office.

We have applied a number of partial strategies to offset the type of puncturing problems described above: we have reminded the school administration of meetings and agreements. When the school administration appears to have "forgotten" fundamental agreements or hasn't "found the time" for administrering the project and disseminating information about it, we have attempted to raise the entire set of project problems in order to clarify, together with the school administration, their central responsibility for the progress of the project.

Economy As a Strategic Agent

In communities where "The School in Its Local Environment" project is to be implemented, the communities themselves must pay a considerable portion of project expenses. This, in many contexts, will be a stimulus to those responsible for the project locally to ensure its progress. On the other hand, outside economic support to the project may be an enticement for increased effort and commitment. A combination of local economic participation and central economic support, thus often seems to be the best solution/strategy.

Importance of Equilibrium Between Demands of the Environment and Internal Demands of the Organization

An organization will always allocate its resources in such a way as to find an equilibrium between demands made by the environment and those made by the organization itself. And these two demands in fact are related. For instance, demands made by the environment on the organization will result in decreased capacity and resources on the part of the organization, to carry out its own development and meet internal demands. This factor must be taken into consideration in research work. Consequently it will be a fallacious strategy for "The School in Its Local Environment" project to insist on a number of measures which are external in nature when the school is grappling with internal problems. In such a context, a more proper strategy would use the school's internal conditions as a point of departure and develop these within the project context.

In work with internal school development, the starting point should be a thorough mapping and analysis of the school's structure with regard to communication tasks,

decision-making on the one hand, and strategies and value patterns on the other. Such an analysis is a desirable curb on hasty proposals for action.

Project Participants Are often on Divergent Levels of Intentions, Commitment and Degree of Anziety: the Strategic Consequences

By way of summation, we want to stress that our experience has shown that neglecting to make allowances for participants' divergent levels of intentions, commitment and anxiety may result in an early end to the project, for the one and only reason -- communication failure. Consequently it is of vital importance that early in the project research work objectives and progress expectations are clearly delineated jointly.

The Present Status of "The School in Its Local Environment" Project

The following will be a short description of the present status of the project.

The fact that "The School in Its Local Environment" project is still in its initial phase is due largely to circumstances beyond the central control of the National Council on the one hand, and, on the other, in some respect due to a lack of foresight on the part of the project leadership.

The fact that it has taken so long to initiate the project, despite the presence of a concrete idea outline, is the fault of departmental and interdepartmental disagreement regarding the project and its content. A great deal of the opposition has revolved around the claim that "The School in Its Local Environment" project has touched upon relationships which individual departments have viewed as being part of their own area of interest and responsibility. Thus the departmentalization mentality has also made itself felt.

Even though the National Council has not been given the opportunity to clear a broad path for "The School in Its Local Environment" project, it has been possible for it to initiate a number of research activities although on a small scale. This, however, is limited by virtue of the degree of motivation to seek assistance from the National Council which can be elicited from local/municipal school authorities. One step toward this goal was taken by the National Council in the fall of 1980 when it sponsored a broadly-based national working seminar. The intentions of the seminar were to inform locally-based school personnel about the National Council's commitment to "The School in Its Local Environment" project and, at the same time, motivate as many participants as possible to apply for National Council support for the initial phase of the projects. Now, three months after the working seminar, we have only recieved a modest number of responses to our initiative. We have conjectured about the reasons and

have concluded that we may not have been informative and concrete enough. Apart from this, it is clear that our follow-up was inadequate; there should have been greater degree of contact with the individual school representatives. This has been an important lesson from which we will draw the necessary conclusions in the future. In the immediate future, we will call local and regional meetings at which we will discuss with school personnel vital aspects of local research activities in a far more concrete and problem-oriented manner. Now, as opposed to previously, our strategical point of view will be, that we as central project leaders probably are to be found on divergent levels of intentions, commitment and anxiety, compared to many of local project leaders. We will attempt to take this fact into consideration by clarifying, as early as possible in the course of the project, the project's objectives and progress for the continuing local research work.

III. Further Shaping of Strategy

Above, we have notet what we expect in the future for the project. Generally, the prognosis for "The School in Its Local Environment" project is good. In the last year, we have seen improved inter-departmental collaboration in questions of school, culture and local environment. There are many indications that central political authorities will want questions related to school, cultures and environment to play a central role in their school policies in the years to come. And there is reason to believe that the National Council will come to have this as one of its most important areas of activity.

If the above prophesies become reality, it will become possible to advertise the project nationally. Furthermore, it will be easier to do more extensive PR work on its behalf. A consequence of larger response to "The School in Its Local Environment" project will enable the National Council to undertake a total evaluation and give priority to this problem area. In this work we see it as essential to enter into a collaboration with other departments and committees, and as early as possible in the process. This in fact poses a considerable and exciting challenge to the National Council for Innovation in Education in the coming years.

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